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ABSTRACT

Recognizing that a solid base of community support was essential if the district was to effectively confront the influences of declining enrollment, the Tulsa public schools organized a group of unbiased but interested community members to study and make recommendations regarding the problem, particularly the utilization of school facilities. A 48-member task force was assembled. The composition of this task force and the recommendations it offered the superintendent are presented along with a list of 17 conditions and problems that a district confronting declining enrollment is likely to face. Ways of responding to each of these conditions and problems are listed. The speakers indicate that instructional quality can be preserved, even enhanced, in spite of declining enrollment if administrators plan ahead; involve the community; consolidate schools, departments, positions, and programs; be flexible; and be positive. (Author/IRT)

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Can Instructional Quality be Preserved

As Enrollments Decline?

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and

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Introduction

In the mid 1960's, statisticians began predicting smaller enrollments for the public schools of the United States. Accustomed to decades of seemingly endless growth, educators were at first incredulous. In fact, it seemed almost un-American to suggest such a thing in a nation whose whole way of life was geared to growth. But many began to believe these projections when in 1969-70 both kindergarten and first-grade enrollments introduced us to an era of systematic decline in student enrollments which is now reaching even into the high schools.

Particularly hard hit have been, and are the large cities, whose enrollments have, in some cases, dropped by more than one-third from their peak levels of a decade ago. Also today, all but a few rapidly growing suburbs have experienced some loss of enrollment and public schools across the nation are struggling to adjust to this new reality.

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The principal cause of this reversal in enrollment trends is the sharp downturn in the number of births which began in the early 1960's. Because of greater job opportunities, more effective methods of contraception, and legalized abortion, unprecedented numbers of women elected to have only one child, or none at all, during this period. Thus, despite the record number of women of childbearing age (15 to 44) in the United States today, we find that the number of births per year has dropped from 4,274,000 in the late 1950's, to only 3,126,000 in 1976.

Another way of analyzing why school enrollments have declined is by studying the fertility rate, which is the average number of children born per woman. In the early years of our country, the typical woman had seven children. This fertility rate dropped steadily to about 2.2 children per woman in the 1930's. Following World War II, larger families again became popular, bringing the fertility rate to some 3.6 children per woman. Since that time, the rate has declined steadily to an estimated 1.7 for 1977.

The population projection should be a relatively simple matter, notice I said, "should be." Because it simply involves multiplying the number of women of childbearing age (15-44) times the fertility rate. While the number of women can be quite accurately determined, the fertility rate in future years is almost anyone's guess.

The U. S. Census Bureau has carefully surveyed selected samples of young women to inquire how many children they plan to have. The average of these responses is about 2.1 children per woman. Using this as the fertility rate, the Census Bureau projects that the number of births would again rise to almost 4,000,000 per year during the mid-1980's, compared to the 3.1 million in 1976. However, the Census Bureau also offers two other birth projections. The first, based upon an assumed fertility rate of 2.7, foresees almost 5,000,000 births in 1985. The other Census Bureau alternative utilizes the current fertility rate of 1.7 as a factor to project a modest 3,300,000 births in 1985, and dropping well below 3,000,000 after 1990.

One further interesting aspect of the birth rate decline is the age at which young mothers are bearing their first child. After postponing motherhood for years, more and more women in their late twenties and early thirties are deciding to become parents. While birth rates for women in their early twenties--historically the group having the most babies--continued to decline, first births among thirty-year-olds jumped 21 percent between 1972 and 1975. Indications are that millions of women in their early twenties will continue to postpone motherhood. But there is also evidence that increasing numbers of women at or near age thirty are deciding to start families. "If you're thirty and haven't had a child, it's fish-

or-cut-bait time," one sociologist explains. "It's clear that many of these women who have put off having babies realize they can't delay much longer."

But what are the implications of all this for school enrollment? As you are aware, enrollment losses to date have been largely at the elementary level but are now being felt in secondary schools also. Kindergarten through eighth grade enrollments are expected to drop from 31.8 million pupils in 1972 to 27.9 million by 1982. Senior high school enrollments, which peaked at 14.4 million in 1976, will decline to 12.4 million by 1982. The total public school loss is approximately 6 million, or a drop of 46 to 40 million students during the ten years from 1972 to 1982.

For most large cities, however, declining birth rates are only part of the problem. Nationally public school enrollments have been declining about 1% per year, but for large cities the annual figure is often 3% or more. During the five year period from 1971 to 1976, enrollment in all public schools in the United States shrank by 4%. In contrast, Detroit schools lost 16% of their enrollment, Dallas 19%, Montgomery County, Maryland 7%, Columbus, Ohio 11%, San Francisco 17%, Tulsa 18% and St. Louis a startling 23%. And almost without exception, these losses were largely the children of young, more affluent white families, leaving behind in the city an

increasing proportion of disadvantaged, minority pupils with sometimes staggering educational needs. There is the exception with the state of Florida, a state in which I resided for eight years prior to moving to Tulsa in 1976. Florida appears to be the only state where school system enrollments are growing. I think that it is important to note that each of the sixty-seven school systems in Florida is a county-wide school system. Such county-wide organization offers a larger geographic urban/suburban school attendance area in each system, which tends to negate the declining enrollment factor of flight from inner city areas which we find in many other large urban "city" systems.

Moving from the orange trees of Florida, to the oil wells of Oklahoma, we find that Tulsa, a city school system surrounded by fifteen suburban school systems in Tulsa County, is like most other large cities confronted with the problem of declining enrollment.

From a high 80,115 students in 1968, the system is now down to an enrollment of slightly under 58,000 students. The enrollment is expected to drop as low as 45,000 by the mid 1980's.

Until about a year ago, however, Tulsa had not adjusted staffing levels commensurate with the annual enrollment decline. For example, the number of teaching staff members had remained

relatively constant, thus allowing the average elementary class size to drop from 33 to 23 pupils per teacher, with similar reductions also in secondary school classrooms. When it became evident that funds would not be available to continue at the same staffing levels for the 1977-78 school year, teaching allocations were cut by 160 positions. Fearing that retirements and resignations would not be enough, or in the right subject areas to cover this reduction, we reluctantly sent non-renewal notices to some 200 first, second, and third year teachers. At the same time we eliminated 14 administrative positions and 23 support personnel positions. Not surprisingly, the protests from our local classroom teachers group were loud and long. Fortunately, by fall as a result of retirements and resignations, we were able to reemploy all of those who had been terminated the previous spring. This year, we hope to make all our reductions in force solely through attrition.

Another facet of the declining enrollment problem is the under-utilization of facilities. We found ourselves in 1977 still operating 104 schools, the same number as what we had in 1968 when we had 22,000 more students. District-wide, we were utilizing our buildings at only 65% of capacity, with that ratio dropping lower every year. Some elementary schools were down to as few as 150 pupils, resulting in both restricted curricular offerings and inordinately high opera-

tional costs. It was obvious that some of these very small schools needed to be closed and their students dispersed to nearby buildings having ample space to accommodate them.

During the late winter and early spring of 1977, staff members armed themselves with carefully prepared data on membership trends, potential cost savings and the educational advantages of closing two of the smallest elementary schools. Numerous meetings were held with committees, PTA's, community groups and individual patrons. While considerable support was found for closing these schools, the news media highlighted the impassioned pleas of a few to "save our school." Finally, after much effort and several concessions, we managed to close one of the schools but delayed action on the other one till the following year.

Recognizing that a more solid base of community support was essential, we decided to organize a group of unbiased, but interested, community citizens to study and make recommendations regarding the problem of declining enrollment, particularly as to the utilization of school facilities. A forty-eight member Advisory Task Force on Declining Enrollment was assembled, with the individual members appointed by various community groups.

20 members were chosen by PTA's, each representing a neighborhood of approximately five schools.

- 3 teachers, representing elementary, junior high and senior high schools, appointed by the classroom teachers' association.
- 3 principals, one each from elementary, junior high and senior high schools, were named by the local principals' associations.
- 15 appointees were designated by community organizations such as the League of Women Voters, Chamber of Commerce, Ministerial Alliance, Urban League, etc.
- 6 members of the staff were appointed by the Superintendent as nonvoting advisors to the Task Force.

The Task Force chairman, a dynamic, semiretired respected business man, was selected by myself.

During their first meeting in May, 1977 the Task Force was charged with the following responsibilities:

- 1. To study the past and projected membership trends of the Tulsa Public Schools.
- 2. To review the capacity and the condition of the various school buildings.
- 3. To examine the effect of the size of a school's enrollment upon per pupil operational costs.
- 4. To consider the influence of a school's enrollment upon its educational program offerings.

5. To recommend to the Superintendent (1) a long-range plan for utilizing the physical plants of the school district most efficiently and to the maximum benefit of the children served, and (2) the actions required to meet the facility utilization needs for the 1978-1979 school year.

The Task Force met regularly at 3:00 p. m. on the third Thursday of each month, with various committees of the Task Force meeting as needed to carry out their functions. All meetings were open to the public and to the news media, who periodically reported on items being considered.

The first few meetings were largely educational, seeking only to acquaint the Task Force members with the nature and extent of the problem. The Department of Research, Planning and Development, which coordinated and supported the work of the Task Force, supplied data on membership trends and projections, per pupil operational costs, building capacities and school operational procedures. Other staff members explained the organizational and staffing problems in small schools, the costs of transportation and utilities as related to school size, and the supplementary use of school facilities by various community groups.

Task Force members were then randomly assigned to six subcommittees to study and make recommendations concerning the

topics of Operational Costs Per Pupil, Transportation, Standards of Quality for Buildings and Sites, Building Utilization, Alternate Uses of Buildings and Grade Reorganization. These groups made many cogent observations about the operation of schools, together with several tangible recommendations.

Next the Task Force was reorganized into six new sub-committees, again on a random assignment basis, with each sub-committee selecting its own chairman. One sub-committee studies the ten senior highs, one the twenty junior highs, and each of the other four sub-committees studies approximately eighteen elementary schools. This process took almost three months, as committees toured schools, interviewed principals and teachers, analyzed membership and cost data and studied school boundary maps.

Each committee made its report to the total Task Force in December, 1977. Following compilation and editing of these reports by the Task Force chairman, the first draft of the "Final Report of the Advisory Task Force on Declining Enrollment" was presented on January 26, 1978. Following reading and discussion, the report was adopted by the unanimous vote of the Task Force members.

In final printed form, the report was formally presented at a luncheon on February 21, 1978.

In attendance at this luncheon were the members of the Task Force, the Superintendent's staff, the Board of Education and the news media. This gave all parties concerned an opportunity to comment, to clarify and to ask questions regarding the report and recommendations.

Out of their exhaustive study, the Task Force made several important general recommendations. One was that no new schools be built in the one end of our district where there is still room for development, but that pupils from these new housing additions be housed in existing classrooms in nearby schools. A second recommendation was that the grade structure of schools in Tulsa be reorganized, dropping the present K-6, 7-9, 10-12 structure, and instituting a K-5, 6-8, 9-12 plan. This would allow the junior highs to adopt a more child-centered approach along the lines of the middle school model. A third major recommendation was that wherever possible, boundaries of elementary, junior high and senior high school be made coterminous. Under this plan, all pupils graduating from a given elementary school would attend the same junior high, while all those from a given junior high would feed into the same senior high.

Regarding specific schools, the Task Force recommended the closing of nine elementary schools for reasons of low enrollment

and/or inadequate building facilities. No junior highs were recommended for closing but a few boundary changes were recommended to equalize enrollments. For senior highs, boundary changes were recommended for five schools. These senior high boundary changes would not only help to balance enrollments but would also make the boundaries of these schools coterminous with their junior high feeder schools.

While I will probably not recommend all the particular recommendations of this Task Force to the School Board, and in some cases will most likely have to make additional recommendations beyond those recommended by the Task Force, I find most of their suggestions to be reasonable and desirable. In addition, I feel that there is a much greater community-wide understanding of the problems we face with declining enrollment. With the backing of these Task Force recommendations, we now can move to close and consolidate those schools which are most cost ineffective. The savings resulting from these closures will thus be available for reinvestment in an improved program of education in the schools we continue to operate.

If you in your school system are confronted with the declining enrollment dilemma, I strongly recommend this kind of broad community involvement. While it is time consuming, and at

times frustrating, it builds a strong base of support and trust which will be invaluable to you as you seek to do what must be done in terms of consolidation and reorganization of the schools in your district.

Now that I have shared with you as to how we specifically approached the problem of declining enrollment in the Tulsa schools, I am going to generalize from some of our experiences and apply our experiences to the problem as it is being experienced in many school systems across the nation.

I am going to describe for you seventeen various conditions or problems which, if you have not already experienced them, I think you can reasonably expect to encounter in your schools in the near future. However, I will not simply leave you with these problems. In addition, I will propose what seems to me to be reasonable ways of responding to each of them.

1. Fewer new teachers will be employed.
 - a. Refine selection procedures so only the best of many applicants are employed.
 - b. Require certification in two or more fields.
 - c. Retrain present teachers for new and/or dual assignments.
2. Staff reductions will be necessary.
 - a. Resist pressure to fill every vacancy. Make reductions by attrition whenever possible.

- b. As personnel retire, consolidate departments and/or positions.
 - c. Develop written guidelines for staff reduction.
 - d. Offer incentives to encourage early retirement.
- 3. Low staff morale may occur when there are few opportunities for promotion and remaining staff members have to assume additional duties.
 - a. Keep lines of communication open with employee groups.
 - b. Use participative management and shared decision making.
 - c. Offer unique fringe benefits--health exams, recreation programs, recognition for outstanding service, etc.
- 4. Aging staff members will tend to be less flexible and innovative.
 - a. Staff development, released time, incentives, etc.
- 5. Facilities will be underutilized, with many classrooms vacant.
 - a. Expand areas needing space, such as media centers, laboratories, etc.
 - b. Extend services such as volunteer tutors, in-house suspension, classes for dropouts or a program for pregnant girls.
 - c. Rent space to non-profit programs such as senior citizens, day care, etc.
 - d. Close underenrolled schools and sell or lease buildings.
- 6. Maintenance and utility costs will become excessive.
 - a. Turn off utilities in unused rooms or buildings.

- b. Sell or raze unneeded portable buildings.
 - c. Sell or lease unused schools or sites.
 - d. Put automatic timers on heating, air conditioning and lights.
 - e. Educate personnel to reduce energy usage.
7. Because of shifting population within the district, available classrooms are not where needed.
- a. Change boundaries to balance enrollments.
 - b. Establish magnet or alternative programs in schools with excess space.
 - c. Move portable classrooms.
 - d. Move special programs to empty schools.
 - e. Close unneeded schools
8. In large cities, the percentage of educationally disadvantaged students will increase.
- a. Adapt curriculum to meet needs of these students.
 - b. Retrain teachers to accept and serve these students.
9. The percentage of minority students will increase in large city schools.
- a. Make adjustments to keep schools integrated.
 - b. Give human relations efforts top priority.
10. The mobility rate for students in large cities will increase.
- a. Streamline the transfer of student records.
 - b. Develop an individualized, continuous-progress curriculum.

11. Private schools will attract more students in large cities.
 - a. Modify your curriculum to remain competitive, especially for college-bound students.
 - b. Increase public relations efforts to maintain your school's image.
12. The typical school will have fewer pupils, making scheduling more difficult.
 - a. Use multi-grade grouping or the open classroom approach.
 - b. Alternate certain classes by quarters or by years.
 - c. Offer certain courses only in magnet or alternative schools.
 - d. Allow credit for independent study.
 - e. Use mobile classrooms for special services.
 - f. Teach two classes in a single period, such as trigonometry and calculus or advanced biology and physiology.
13. Staffing will require more versatility as schools get smaller.
 - a. Seek teachers who can teach in two or more fields.
 - b. Help teachers to individualize as class sizes are reduced.
 - c. Arrange teaming to utilize teachers' unique talents.
 - d. Utilize community resource persons such as artists, musicians or scientists.
 - e. Assign special teachers between two or more schools.
 - f. Use programmed or multi-media instructional materials.

- g. Actively recruit and train volunteer aides.
14. Despite smaller enrollments, costs will probably continue to increase.
- a. Consolidate schools, departments and positions.
 - b. Avoid new bond issues to allow debt service fund requirements to decline.
 - c. Avoid salary changes which disproportionately increase maximums for the most experienced employees.
15. As fewer voters have children in school, millage levies will be harder to pass.
- a. Open the schools to the community through adult education, senior citizens' groups and the community school concept.
 - b. Give increased attention to timing, organizing and publicizing millage elections.
16. As retrenchment occurs and achievement, particularly in large cities, drops lower, the public schools may be viewed as "losers."
- a. Develop an aggressive, hard-sell public relations program.
 - b. Emphasize the good things that are happening in schools.
 - c. Inoculate employees with a heavy dose of enthusiasm, lest they infect the whole community with creeping cynicism.

17. Every school closure will alienate some voters.
- a. Utilize a citizens' task force to make recommendations.
 - b. Plan ahead. Allow plenty of time.
 - c. Involve parents, teachers and principals in the decisions.
 - d. Seek the cooperation of other agencies and the media.
 - e. Emphasize the educational advantages of larger schools, not just the cost savings.
 - f. When a school is to be closed, be sure the students are sent to a better one.
 - g. Avoid overkill--save some buildings and sites for future use.
 - h. Seek ways that closed schools can be used to serve the community.

Summary

Instructional quality can be preserved, and even enhanced, in spite of declining enrollment if you keep in mind what I have just listed, and if you do the following:

1. Plan ahead. Don't wait until the full impact of declining enrollment hits. It's easier to revise curriculum in a few areas each year than to attempt to modify programs after classrooms have been made chaotic by frustrated students. Make the best projections you can about the future of your school, even if you must do some "guesstimating." Then develop and implement a plan of action to cope with these anticipated conditions.
2. Involve your community. Sure this takes time. Sure there is some risk. Of course they may not come up with the same conclusions and recommendations you would. But if you don't involve them, you'll never get their support and you'll never get your plan into action. Someone said, "We're down on the things we're not up on." Keep your community up on the problems facing their school system. Solicit their involvement so they'll become a part of the solution rather than a part of the problem. And don't forget to involve your teachers, your principals and even the students in planning how to cope with declining enrollment.

3. Consolidate. Begin consolidating schools, departments, positions and programs now. Yes, closing a school can be painful, but waiting until ten have to be closed can be fatal--to your district's financial position, to the quality of instruction and even to your career. A quality instructional program requires that dollars must be saved from the consolidation of inefficient operations, and these dollars reinvested in the best education possible for the children in your schools.
4. Be flexible. Emerson said, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." Recognize that old patterns of staffing, scheduling and organizing instructional programs may no longer be appropriate for smaller groups of students. This is even more true if, additionally, these students come from more deprived backgrounds and more diverse social and ethnic groups. Use what you have to create a stimulating learning environment for today's students.
5. Be positive. Declining enrollment is not all bad. It offers the possibility of smaller classes, enlarged learning areas, more experienced teachers, and time to devote to improving instruction, rather than to always constructing new buildings to house the next wave of children. Once again quoting Emerson, "Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm." Be enthusiastic as you work to improve the quality of instruction

in spite of--or perhaps even because of--declining enrollment.

Can instructional quality be preserved as enrollments decline?

Yes, I believe so and I believe you are the ones to do it.